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## Judæo-Christian Polemics in the Zohar.

As a production of the thirteenth century, which witnessed in France and Spain the first great religious disputes between the representatives of Judaism and Christianity, it is not to be expected that the Zohar should be entirely free of all traces of Judæo-Christian polemics. But I am not aware that they have heretofore received attention, and I therefore propose to give a short summary of them here.

1. Three Questions.—R. Abba relates in the name of the Holy Light, *i.e.*, of Simon b. Jochai, that a Gentile philosopher once came to R. Eleazar, and asked him the three following questions:—(1.) ‘You say that another sanctuary will again be built for you, but where is there in the Scriptures any mention of a third temple? Is it not expressly said of the second temple: ‘The glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former?’ (Haggai ii. 9). (2.) You say further, that you stand nearer God, the Supreme King, than all other nations; but ought not those who are near the king to be rich in joys, and permanently free from grief, fear, and oppression? You, on the contrary, live constantly in suffering and oppression, more than all other men. It is we, rather than you, who stand near the Supreme King, and you are far from him; therefore we are free from oppression and suffering, whilst you are constantly troubled and oppressed. (3.) Lastly, you assert that you abstain from forbidden kinds of food in order that you may be healthy, and that health may be given to your bodies. But in reality it is we, who eat whatever we please, that are healthy and strong, while you are weak and afflicted with illnesses and bodily infirmities more than all other nations.” R. Eleazar became wroth at the questions, and stared hard at the questioner, until he became an inanimate “heap of bones.”<sup>1</sup> When his anger had subsided, R. Eleazar wept and prayed, and then he told how he had once put these same three questions to the prophet Elijah, who had given him the answer which the questions had received in the heavenly “House of Learning.” The answers were to the following effect:—“As regards the first question, the two sanctuaries, which, according to Exodus xv. 17 (מבון מקדש), were to be built by God himself, are not identical with the two historical temples. Both the temple of Solomon, and the temple built after the Babylonian exile,

<sup>1</sup> This is an incident borrowed from various Talmudic legends ונעשה גל של עצמות. *Berachoth*, 58a, *Sabbath*, 34a, *Baba Bathra*, 75a (*Sanhedrin* 100a).

were human handiwork, and had therefore no stability. The real sanctuaries, which were promised to Israel, will be God's own creation, and descend upon the new Jerusalem the one visible to all, the other above it, but hidden and invisible, enveloped in the clouds of the divine glory. For this true temple we still are waiting." To the second question he answered, "Undoubtedly we stand nearer than all other nations to the Supreme King, for God has appointed Israel to be the heart of the world. Israel bears the same relation to the other nations as the heart does to the limbs; it is the heart alone which feels pain, suffering, and oppression while the other limbs know nothing of them."

Then as to the third question:—"Israelites, unlike the Gentiles, abstain from all unclean food, just as the tender and delicate heart, on which the welfare of all the limbs depends, only absorbs the purest elements of food, leaving all coarser nutriment for the stronger limbs." (*Zohar*, פנהת IV. 220 b, 221 b.) If we remove from this passage its dramatic and legendary environment, we get a specimen of Judæo-Christian polemics, as they may actually have taken place in Spain during the thirteenth century between the representatives of Judaism and Christianity. If one pursued these investigations, the three questions would probably be met with in the polemic literature of the period. The answer to the first question has a purely mystical character, and rests upon the old idea of a heavenly sanctuary. The answers to the second and third questions are based upon a thought, which is borrowed from Jehuda Halevi. In one of the most beautiful and well-known passages of the *Kusari*, Israel's suffering is deduced from its resemblance to the human heart, and this comparison is carried out still further. (Cassel, in his edition of the *Kusari*, 2nd Ed., p. 143, refers to our passage of the *Zohar*, but does not notice that R. Jacob Emden, in his criticism of the *Zohar*, had already drawn attention to the loan of this image from the *Kusari*. Compare Grätz, *Geschichte*, Vol. VII., 1st Ed., p. 494.)

2. Truth is everlasting.—R. Chiya relates to R. Jose:—"I was once walking with R. Eleazar when we met a Gentile,<sup>1</sup> between whom and R. Eleazar the following conversation took place:—The Gentile: 'You are well acquainted with the Holy Scriptures of the Jews?' Eleazar: 'Yes.' Gentile: 'You say, do you not, that your belief is Truth, and your Holy Scripture Truth, whereas our belief and our Holy Scripture are lies? How then do you understand Proverbs

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<sup>1</sup> He is also called הַנְּבוֹן, which, in the middle ages stood for bishop. But it is possible that in the *Zohar*, corresponding to the style of the story, הַנְּבוֹן is used in the Talmudic sense of Roman General (ἡγεμὼν, dux)

xii. 19: "The lip of truth shall be established for ever; but a lying tongue is but for a moment?" Is it not our kingdom which has been established of old, and which is not taken from us, whereas your kingdom was taken from you after a short time? Therefore, the lip of truth, which is everlasting, refers to us, and to you the lying tongue which passes away?' Eleazar: 'I see that you are well versed in Holy Scripture, but you do not understand this passage correctly. You would have been right had not the word *תכון* disproved your argument. For it does not say *כוננה* (has been established), but *תכון* (will be established); so the verse can only mean, Truth will in the future be established, even if it is not established now. At present, lies stand erect, and Truth lies on the ground. But in the future, Truth will stand firm.' The Gentile: 'You are right, and that people is right which possesses the doctrine of Truth.'" After some time (so the story ends), we heard that the questioner became converted to Judaism. (*Zohar*, *כי תישא* II., 188 b.)

This story also displays the character of Judæo-Christian polemics, even if we pay no attention to the name *הגמון* which is given to the Gentile speaker. It is sufficient to point to the accentuation of the contrariety between the "faith" and the "Holy Writ" of either creed. The corresponding passage in the original reads:—*לית אתון אמרין דמהימנותא דלכון קשום ואורייתכון קשום ואנן דמהימניתא דולן שקר ואורייתא דילן שקר*

By *אורייתא* we must not understand "instruction" generally, because this idea is already contained in *מהימנותא*, but in a concrete sense, as religious scripture, therefore the Old Testament on the one side, and the New Testament on the other.

3. Commenting on Jer. x. 7, R. Simon b. Jochai tells his son, Eleazar:—"One day a Gentile philosopher came to me and said, 'You say that your God rules over all the heights of heaven, and that the hosts of heaven do not know His dwelling-place. Why then does the Scripture in this verse of Jeremiah, "Among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their kingdom, there is none like unto Thee," compare him with transitory mortals? You say, further, that while according to the words of Scripture (Deut. xxxiv. 10), "There arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses," it is true that no prophet arose like unto him in Israel, among the other nations there did arise a prophet who was like unto him.' So would I also explain the words of Jeremiah, "Among the wise men of the nations there is none like unto God, but there is among the wise men of Israel." Therefore, the God whose like there is among the wise men of Israel, would

<sup>1</sup> *Viz.*, Bileam, see Sifré.

not be the Almighty and sovereign God. **אֵי הִבִּי אֱלֹהִים רֵאִיתָ** 'Reflect upon this passage,' concludes the philosopher, 'and you will find that my explanation is correct.' The answer which Simon b. Jochai gave is to the effect that, in reality, the wise men (prophets) in Israel, through the miracles they wrought, are indeed comparable with God, and that God himself has commanded Israel to walk in his ways and to become like him in everything."

After he had received this answer the philosopher went away, and was converted to Judaism in the township of Kephher Schichlaim.<sup>1</sup> He was called Jose Ketinaa,<sup>2</sup> taught much Torah, and was numbered among the pious and wise men of that town (*Zohar*, Introd. I. g. b.).

This story has this feature in common with the preceding one, that the Gentile interlocutor eventually becomes a proselyte. That he is described as a "philosopher" rests upon numerous polemic passages in the Talmud and Midrash, where the word "philosopher" is practically equivalent to "Christian." His subtle explanation of the verse in Jeremiah, which he slyly strengthens by a recognised canon of interpretation in the Midrash, reaches a result which reminds one of the fundamental conception of the gnostic systems, according to which the God of the Old Testament is different from the Almighty God of the universe. The dialogue is possibly taken from some older source, from which also the information respecting the residence and name of the converted philosopher may have been borrowed. But it is also possible that the point of the argument from Jeremiah x. 7, is to show that there has been one among the wise men of Israel who was like God—namely, Jesus.

4. Israel's Poverty.—The passage in the Talmud that God found no better quality to bestow on Israel than poverty (*vide Chagiga*, 9b), is explained in the following manner:—Other nations, when they are hungry, become angry, and utter imprecations against their king and their God (according to Isaiah viii. 21), while Israel, in poverty and misery, holds fast to the Divine Covenant, and does not repudiate his God. Therefore redemption will be his reward, because of his constancy (II. Sam. xxii. 28; *Zohar* עקב, IV. 273d.). This remark has clearly a polemic edge, for it places the pious resignation of the Jews, even under distress, in contrast to the insolence of other nations, who do not even shrink from blasphemous curses. A closer investigation of the *Zohar* would perhaps bring to light some more particulars of this kind, in which the source of the Kabbala supplies also materials for the literature of mediæval polemics.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Neubauer, *La Géographie du Talmud*, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* Seder Haddoroth, s.v. קטנותא יוסף.